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INTELLIGIBILITY OF DIFFERENT ENGLISH VARIETIES OF STUDENTS AT FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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Intelligibility of Different English Varieties of Students at Fu Jen Catholic University

Abstract

As more people around the world uses English to communicate with others, intelligibility of different varieties of English becomes vital. However, there are many factors that could influence listeners' intelligibility, such as familiarity with certain English varieties and English proficiency of the listeners. Most English education in Expanding Circle countries emphasizes Inner Circle models and uses them as the standard for teaching English. Tertiary schools in Taiwan, for example, teaches primarily in American English. This may prevent students from being able to understand other English varieties. This study aims to find out the relationship between intelligibility, familiarity, and English proficiency of students at Fu Jen Catholic University and provide means that could improve English instruction.

Key Words

Intelligibility; Kachru's three concentric circles of English; Accent familiarity; English proficiency

Outline

    I.   Introduction

        A.   English can be distinguished as three concentric circles according to linguist Braj Kachru proposes: the Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. (Kirpatrick 28).

B. Intelligibility of different English varieties becomes a problem due to the increasing number of English speakers from around the world.

C. Thesis Statement: This study aims to find out the relationship between intelligibility, familiarity, and English proficiency of students at Fu Jen Catholic University and provide means that could improve English instruction.

II. Literature Review

    A. Familiarity

        i. "Research in speech perception and processing has shown that prior exposure to foreign-accented speech leads to faster processing speeds" due to listeners' development in perceptual adaptation to foreign-accented speech (Huang 771, 776).

        ii. Studies also show "a trend toward a positive relationship between intelligibility and duration of overseas experience" (Orikasa 362).

    B. English Proficiency

        i. There is "evidence of an interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit for listeners (i.e., native Mandarin listeners were more accurate than native English listeners at identifying Mandarin-accented English words)" (Hayes-Harb et. al. 664).

        ii. "Non-native listeners who are exposed primarily or entirely to English spoken with an accent in their own language perceive their fellows' speech better than that of native English speakers" (Xie and Fowler 376).

        iii. In cases concerning native English speech, "non-native English speakers may experience difficulty in understanding spoken

English, even when they have a good understanding of written

English" (Irvine 314).

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Intelligibility of Different English Varieties of Students at Fu Jen Catholic University

I.   Introduction

English has grown to become one of the most influential languages around the world today. As the famous Linguist Braj Kachru proposed, English can be distinguished as three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, which "refers to the traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English", the Outer Circle, which "represents the institutionalized non-native varieties in the regions that have passed through extended periods of colonization" where English is considered as a second language (ESL), and Expanding Circle, which "includes the regions where the performance varieties of the language are used essentially in EFL [English as a foreign language] contexts" (Kirkpatrick 28). Examples of Inner Circle countries include the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where English language norms are developed. The Outer Circle that is norm-developing consists of countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Last but not least, the Expanding Circle encompasses countries like France, China, and Taiwan, which are norm-dependent and rely heavily on Inner Circle standards.

People all over the world are learning English and speakers in the Inner Circle are largely outnumbered by those in the Outer and Expanding Circles. It is inevitable that there will be more interactions occurring between non-native English speakers (ESL and EFL) than between native English speakers and non-native English speakers. However, as English becomes a global language, there is also development in language variation, in which intelligibility becomes a concern. Intelligibility is the ability to understand words and utterances that are heard. For global communication in English, intelligibility is imminent. However, most English education in Expanding Circle countries emphasizes Inner Circle models and uses them as the standard for teaching English. Tertiary schools in Taiwan, for example, teaches primarily in American English. Even the Test of English for International

Communication (TOEIC) only uses speakers from Inner Circle countries in its listening section. As a result, foreign-accented speech is more likely to become inferior in students' minds, and intelligibility of different varieties of English becomes troublesome. The current English instruction in Fu Jen Catholic University is limited to such standards. This study aims to find out the relationship between intelligibility, familiarity, and English proficiency of students at Fu Jen Catholic University and provide means that could improve English instruction.

II.   Literature Review

A. Familiarity

It is sensible to think that the more contact with a variety of the English language, the more familiar one is with such variety, and thus will be able to recognize the speech more easily. "Research in speech perception and processing has shown that prior exposure to foreign-accented speech leads to faster processing speeds" due to listeners' development in perceptual adaptation to foreign-accented speech (Huang 771, 776). Many studies and experiments have also aligned with such viewpoint. One study in Japan, for example, suggests that "less familiar accent was more difficult for students to comprehend than a more familiar North American English accent" (Matsuura et. al. 143). Just like students in Taiwan, Japanese university students are primarily exposed to Inner Circle English varieties. This makes instruction or assessments comprehension more difficult when students encounter different English varieties in which they are not familiar with.

Familiarity is substantial for listeners as ESL "listeners who have learned a second language later in life happen to naturally form a class of listeners who vary in experience with foreign accents" (Weber et. al. 480). This experience can then be advantageous to students in terms of intelligibility. Studies also show "a trend toward a positive relationship between intelligibility and duration of overseas experience" (Orikasa 362). With these prior

experiences, students can understand different English varieties more easily, more so if their native languages are the same. Familiarity therefore plays an important role in English intelligibility, since different varieties each comes with a different accent and cultural background.

    B. English Proficiency

Another popular general assumption about intelligibility is that English proficiency determines the ability to recognize English speech. Native English speakers should therefore be able to understand English speech better than non-native speakers despite of the variety. However, studies have shown otherwise. There is "evidence of an interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit for listeners (i.e., native Mandarin listeners were more accurate than native English listeners at identifying Mandarin-accented English words)" (Hayes-Harb et. al. 664). In these cases, native listeners usually find unaccented [native] speech more intelligible than [non-native] speech, but [non-native] listeners can find [non-native] speech at least as intelligible as [native] speech", even with non-native speech from speakers with varying language background (Weber et. al. 481). English proficiency is no longer a determiner of English intelligibility due to the variability from all around the world.

As studies have shown, "non-native listeners who are exposed primarily or entirely to English spoken with an accent in their own language perceive their fellows' speech better than that of native English speakers" (Xie and Fowler 376). Native English speakers should have better English proficiency than non-native English speakers, but that does not guarantee better English intelligibility. In cases concerning native English speech, "non-native English speakers may experience difficulty in understanding spoken English, even when they have a good understanding of written English" (Irvine 314). Once again, English intelligibility is independent from English proficiency. Non-native English speakers may still find familiar accents more recognizable than native English speech regardless of their English proficiency.

III.   Research Methodology

A. Research Questions

1. What is the intelligibility of Inner, Outer and Expanding circle English for students at Fu Jen Catholic University?

2. Does one's contact with different varieties of English, English language level (CEFR level), and the ability to recognize the accents influence his/her intelligibility of different English varieties?

3. Is the intelligibility of the interviewees' ranked in descending order from Inner Circle to Outer Circle to Expanding Circle English?

B. Data Collection

Interviews will be conducted with five student volunteers from Fu Jen Catholic University. English proficiency of interviewees will range from B2 to C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to ensure they have an effective operational proficiency of the English Language but are still able to be distinguished by different English levels. Interviewees will listen to six audio recordings of English monologues or conversations from different varieties, two from Inner Circle, two from Outer Circle, and two from Expanding Circle. Each of the recordings will be 20 to 40 seconds long. There will be a pause after each recording is played. During the pause, the interviewees need to summarize the main ideas of what they have heard. They will then take a guess on the speakers' nationalities according to their accents. A list of questions about their language background will be asked and recorded by the interview conductor.

C. Participants' English Background

From the English background questionnaire, we found out the following about the participants. Participant A has the lowest English proficiency level out of the five participants. His TOEIC score ranked in B2 on the CEFR scale. He is a non-English-department student

from Fu Jen Catholic University, though some of the courses offered in such department are lectured in English. He has never been abroad to English-speaking countries. Participant B is a student of English department and also ranked in B2 on the CEFR scale based on his TOEIC score. He has been abroad several times during his studies. Participant C has the same conditions as participant B, except for that he is ranked in C1 based on his TOEIC score. Participant D is from non-English department, and has stayed in the United States for two months. His TOEIC score ranks him in C2 on the CEFR scale. Participant E is not only from English department but is also a native speaker of English who has lived in the United States for ten years prior to college.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Accent Recognition: Results

Table 1

Varieties \ Interviewees	American English: 4/5	British English: 5/5	Indian English: 3/5	Singaporean English: 0/5	French English: 4/5	Mandarin Chinese English: 2/5
A (B2)		*			*	
B (B2)	*	*	*		*	
C (C1)	*	*			*	*
D (C2)	*	*	*			
E (C2)	*	*	*		*	*

Interviewees got the best outcome when identifying Inner Circle English varieties. For American English, four out of five participants were able to identify the accent. The only participant who could not identify the accent was participant A, who has the lowest English proficiency and least experience with English speakers. All five participants were able to identify British English accent. Based on the English background questionnaire, it could be

inferred that participant A is able to identify British English accent correctly due to recent exposure of movies and TV shows with British actors.

Participants got the worst results with Outer Circle English. Three participants were able to identify Indian English Accent: participant B, D, and E. None of the participants, however, were able to identify Singaporean English accent. This is most likely due to the lack of contact with Outer Circle English speakers.

Nonetheless, participants did better with Expanding Circle English, even though it is the furthest away from the center of the Circle. Four out of five participants correctly identified French English accent, with the exception of Participant D. Yet, only two participants, participant C and E, is able to identify Mandarin Chinese English accent. Though participants could not easily recognize the accent that they are supposed to be most familiar with, they did considerably better at identifying Expanding Circle English accents.

B. Accent Recognition: Discussion

For participants in the B2 level of English proficiency, participant B, who is from English department and has been abroad several times, did significantly better than participant A, who is from non-English department and has never been abroad. For participants in the C2 level, participant E, who is a native speaker of American English and has lived in the United States for 10 years, also got better results than participant D, who is from non-English department and has only stayed in the United States for two months. However, participant D did just as well as participant C, who is from English department and has been abroad several times.

From the above results, contact with different varieties of English does seem to influence participants' ability to recognize different English varieties. English language level, contrary to previous assumption, also influences the ability to recognize different accents. Participants from the same English proficiency level but with different amount of experience

with other English varieties seem to differ in their ability to recognize the different English varieties. Participants' ability to recognize different English varieties indeed have a positive relationship with their English proficiency level and the amount of contact with different varieties of English.

C. Intelligibility: Results

Table 2

Varieties / Interviewees	American English: 4/5	British English: 4/5	Indian English: 3/5	Singaporean English: 0/5	French English: 5/5	Mandarin Chinese English: 5/5
A (B2)					*	*
B (B2)	*	*	*		*	*
C (C1)	*	*			*	*
D (C2)	*	*	*		*	*
E (C2)	*	*	*		*	*

Participants were examined for their ability to understand the voice recording that were played by making a summary of the dialogue. The intelligibility of different varieties of English are listed below. For Inner Circle English, the results were both four out of five varieties which were intelligible. Participant A makes the exception for both American English and British English, most likely due to the insufficiency of English proficiency and contact with different English varieties.

Outer Circle English is the least intelligible based on the five participants. Three participants were able to understand Indian English speech: participant B, D, and E. Their greater contact with other English varieties compared to participant A and C may play a vital role in their intelligibility. Singaporean English was unintelligible to all of the

participants. Possible reason for this could be due to the usage of different dialects of Chinese in Singaporean English dialect. Without the knowledge of vocabulary from other dialects of Chinese, it may be difficult for listener to understand Singaporean English speech.

Once again, participants got the best results with Expanding Circle English. All of the participants were able to understand both French English and Mandarin Chinese speech. It is believed that familiarity with Outer Circle English varieties can increase the intelligibility with such varieties.

D. Intelligibility: Discussion

Overall, participants in the C2 English proficiency level generally received better results than participants in the lower English proficiency level, with the exception of participant B. Participant A only found Expanding Circle English intelligible, possibly due to lack of contact with other English varieties. From the above results, English proficiency level and contact with different varieties of English appears to influence participants' intelligibility to a certain extent. Participants' ability to recognize different varieties of English, however, does not seem to influence their ability to understand different varieties of English speech.

E. Ranking of Intelligibility

Based on the five participants, the most intelligible English varieties are from the Expanding Circle, suggesting that contact with certain English varieties strongly influences intelligibility of said varieties. The least intelligible English varieties are from the Outer Circle, most likely due to the lack of prior experience and specific vocabulary of such varieties. Inner Circle English varieties are not as intelligible as Expanding Circle English varieties, but are still fairly intelligible. Since most school systems in Taiwan is

based on the American English standards, it is reasonable for participants to be able to understand Inner Circle English better than Outer Circle English.

V. Conclusion

From the evidence collected in this research, it can be suggested that familiarity is an important factor for intelligibility of different English varieties. In order to allow students at Fu Jen Catholic University to have a better understanding of other English varieties, some suggestions on classroom instruction are provided.

One way to improve students' familiarity is to hire more teachers speaking different English varieties. The more contact students have with other English varieties, the better their intelligibility is. Another way to help students be more familiar with other English varieties is to add more courses that are held as global classrooms. Interacting and conducting discussions with students from different English circles may also increase students' familiarity and further improve their intelligibility. For students particularly not in English department, they should also have more courses with English instruction. Classes like Calculus or Marketing can all be taught in English so students can receive more input on a regular basis.

Some final consideration should be pointed out for further research in the future. First of all, the sample size of this research is insufficient to make a strong claim. The students who participated cannot act solely as the representation of all students in Fu Jen Catholic University. Another problem with the research lies with the audio recordings. It should be noted that the content of the audio recordings should be of related subjects. The difficulty level of the content could affect the outcome of participants' understanding. With the above consideration, the research can then be carried further to investigate other possible causes that may influence listeners' intelligibility.

VI. Appendix

A. Language Background Questionnaire

   i. Have you ever lived in any countries other than Taiwan? If so, where and for how long?

   ii. How did you learn English? (i.e., English Cram School, Taiwanese Education System, International/Bilingual School)

   iii. Have you ever taken any English proficiency exams? If so, which ones and what were your scores?

B. Sound Recording Sources

- American English: 0:02~0:39 (37 seconds)

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdiFzcpmmJc

- British English 2:03-2:26 (23 seconds)

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WD010vkGe4

- Indian English 0:26~0:46 (20 seconds)

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9arM_agKFA&feature=youtu.be

- Singaporean English 0:12~0:44 (32 seconds)

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d28yRBX0tgo&list=PLevrTUNPQXXF
  WWhMGUKajgUwo_LRQ-TYS&index=6

- French English 0:23~0:53 (30 seconds)

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bigeWSYMYaM&list=PLevrTUNPQXX
  FWWhMGUKajgUwo_LRQ-TYS&index=4&t=53s

- Mandarin Chinese English 0:35~1:00 (25 seconds)

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K94k-
  2ILMDc&index=9&list=PLevrTUNPQXXFWWhMGUKajgUwo_LRQ-TYS

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